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ABSTRACT

Rural mainland China has undergone dramatic changes since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The collectivization of agriculture basically altered the rural arrangement of conventional China. Using a series of mass media campaigns, Mao Tse-Tung to some extent transformed the traditional rural social system to what he envisioned as a modern socialist system. Although mass media are not as advanced in China as in other developed nations, the top-down communication strategy serves the rural development program well. China has relied on interpersonal communication which has proved effective in the rural development program, making up for the backwardness of electronic media. Print media also helped to enlist mass participation by reporting Mao's addresses and shaping the party's rural development policy. With the new leadership and modernization program in force, it is expected that China will take advantage of developing mass media to promote and foster future rural developments. (DF)

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COMMUNICATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENTS
IN COMMUNIST CHINA REVISITED

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OVERVIEW

A series of vigorous institutional changes taken place since the take-over of the communist government in China have profoundly affected the whole rural agrarian set up and development. Early changes like the Land Reform in the early fifties and the configuration of the cooperatives after the fiasco of the Great Leap Forward in 1958 into people's communes have changed rural China radically from its pre-liberation period in the late forties.

The earliest rural development program in China after the establishment of the People's Republic by Mao Tsetung was instigated one year after Mao delivered his speech at the People's Political Consultative Conference held on September 29, 1949:

In all areas where agrarian reform has been thoroughly implemented.....it shall be the central task of the people's government to organize the peasants and all manpowers available for agriculture, for the development of agricultural production and side occupation.¹

The essence of the early Land Reform in China, as laid down by the Communist party, was to transfer private land ownership to state ownership and to increase agricultural production through technical transformation. In order to achieve such goals, the communist government had implemented several rural development programs in its first twenty years of reign, such as the Land Reform (1950-52), the First Five

Year Plan (1953-57), the Great Leap Forward (1958) and the Second Five Year Plan (1957-61).

The institutional transformation carried out by the various campaigns through the organization of Peasants' Association, the Mutual Aid Team (MAT) and the Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives (APC) and the Advanced Agricultural Producers' Cooperatives (AAPC) has accomplished an overall increase in agricultural productivity in China. However, some areas are reported to be moving far ahead while others lagging behind. The underlying factor of such unparallel development in the rural sectors is the lack of coordination between the regional administration and the central government as well as between the regional administration and the local farmers. Messages can not be accurately and effectively transmitted to the farmers and from the farmers to the high level administration due to the apathy and ignorance of the village cadres. It was until the conversion of all advanced cooperatives into people's communes in 1958 that a better communication network began to take place in rural China.

The structure of a people's commune enables its members to set up a more cohesive interpersonal communication network which is at the same time supplemented by the developing mass media. Communes are responsible for the dissemination of agricultural information and this enables the researchers and farmers to establish a closer contact and better relationship. Such contact, on the other hand, is mainly through the

agriculture extension service which operates on a "three-in-one" principle among the farmers, technicians and cadre researchers:

.....that the cadres, through participation in agricultural research, are capable of acquiring the technology of production is a contributory factor to the assumption of leadership on the part of the Party over agricultural science and technology, as well as as over agricultural production. The alliance with the cadres and the masses on the part of the agricultural technicians would facilitate the demolition of their bourgeois tendencies of knowledge monopolization, and hence would narrow the three differences in China, and would enable the intelligentsia to walk on the path leading to both redness and expertness.²

At the same time, the proliferation of the agricultural extension stations also provides the impetus needed for the diffusion of innovation in spite of the low literacy rate of the peasants. The thousands and thousands of send-down college students and the rotation among the researchers in field work and research also contributed to the diffusion of agricultural knowledge. Through such policy, China has accomplished in closing the gap between the research and application in agricultural transformation where the latest knowledge on agricultural technology provides valuable inputs for field application.

Admittedly, the Chinese government still adopts a top-down strategy in its rural development. In other words, all

policies on agricultural development and innovations come from the central government in Peking via the mass media and reinforced by interpersonal contact at the lowest level. The downward communication channels in China are well-defined in the sense of a bureaucratic hierarchy. Limited horizontal and upward channels are provided at regional level. Of course, the introduction of more advanced communication technologies in the future may well alter the present communication system in rural China. However, as certain elements inherited from the bureaucracy during Mao's time are embedded in the post-Mao administration, it probably will take some time for China to change the top-down system.

In view of the above discussion, the rest of this paper is therefore devoted to the analyzes of the contemporary rural development program and the role of communication in bringing such program to work under the top-down framework.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

During the Fifteenth National People's Congress held in February, 1977, a ten-year plan (1976-85) for the development of China's national economy was proposed. This plan sets the stage for future national development in the following ten years with the target of producing 400 million tons of grains and 50 million tons of steel annually by 1985. The more

specific target for agricultural development is:

- (1) An increase in annual agricultural production rate of 4 to 5 per cent.
- (2) Food production would reach 4 billion tons, an increase of 40.5 per cent over that of 1977. This would also mean an annual increase rate of 4.4 per cent.
- (3) Agriculture mechanization should reach 85 per cent. This would imply an increase in the employment of tractors, automatic sprinklers, trucks and other heavy machines.
- (4) An increase in the use of chemical fertilizer to 800 million tons per year.
- (5) Electrification of the rural farms which would boost the annual consumption to 80 billion kilowatt-hours.
- (6) Improvements in the farm drainage systems.

Western observers are skeptical about the possibility of achieving so much in such a short time, however, the various measures adopted by the Chinese government and the great efforts put into the Four Modernizations (1977) program will inevitably contribute to the accomplishment of the target to a certain extent, if not entirely.

The Chinese government still emphasizes the Learning from Tachai approach in the development of agriculture. The transformation from a poor, barren mountainous village into the nation's number one production village has provided invaluable impetus for the other villages under the same adverse production conditions in their struggle for increasing production. As

a result, the Tachai Production Brigade in Shansi Province has been cheered as the pace-setter in national agricultural development. Millions of Chinese farmers are encouraged in one way or the other to model after Tachai.

Admittedly, agricultur is the foundation of Chinese national economy and the development of industry and other social sectors depend heavily on the output of grains and the amount of income it can generate. Hua Kuofeng, the Prime Minister of China, also emphasizes the importance of agriculture to the national development of China:

Agriculture is the foundation of the national economy. If agriculture does not develop faster there will be no upswing in industry and the economy as a whole, and even if there is a temporary upswing, a decline will follow, and major national calamities will produce really serious trouble.³

In view of its importance, the Chinese government has taken several measures to beef up the agricultural development. One measure is to help those poor and lower farmers in remote mountainous areas and minority groups with more national investment. In other words, the government is to invest more in such areas than in other areas in the country. The second measure is to provide more extensive credit to communes for expansion. In this way, communes will be able to mechanize their farm equipment through government loans and diversify their investments into other side-line operations. In order to provide the farmers with more profit so that they can re-invest into their expansions, the Chinese government has also

decided to increase the purchasing price of farm products from the farmers. As a measure to achieve Mao's "self-reliance" ideology, communes are also encouraged to undertake certain industrial investments through low taxation or even tax exemption under certain cases. Such policy is to provide the communes with adequate economic foundation to build their future development upon.

Commune-run industry, as argued by the Chinese government, will eventually narrow the gap between the towns and the villages. This will also help to integrate the two social classes: the workers and farmers in the long run. Above all the aforementioned measures, the most important measure adopted by the Chinese government which affects the farmers directly is the resolution to fix the agricultural tax and guarantee grain purchasing quota for five years. In this way, those farmers who have fulfilled their quota will be able to reserve their surplus for a more competitive price and reap some extra profit. On the other hand, the government will lower the agricultural tax and purchasing quota of those farmers who suffered from natural disaster. The main objective of such measures is to provide the farmers with maximum protection so as to encourage them in their endeavor to raise production.

The above measures have to some extent been hampered by the major problems now facing China: the electrification and mechanization of the rural areas. Between these two problems, mechanization of the farm equipment presents more problem

than electrification. Ironically, farm machines produced in China are so unique that it is difficult to interchange their parts. A lack of standard in such machines rendered the farmers difficult to fully mechanize their farm equipment. On the other hand, the low literacy rate of the farmers and the low education level of the cadres also caused great problems in promoting agricultural development. The only remedy is to increase the proliferation of agricultural colleges in rural communities and the extension of the cadres' training to include science and technology.

The rural development program, as the Chinese government puts it, should be an all-round development program. In other words, besides the development of major agricultural products, farmers are also encouraged to pay more attention to other side-line operations such as forestry, animal husbandry, and fishery. The income generated from such operations will also provide some additional financial backup for the farmers in their future investment and modernization of farm facilities.

As mentioned earlier, one key factor in the process of farm mechanization is the availability of industrial plants in rural communes. In China, most of the farm machines are assembled in urban plants before they are sent to the rural farms. Any mechanical problems happened to the farm machines will require them to be returned to the plant for repair and with the poor transportation system in China, this will take some time before the machines can be reinstalled into the production line. The establishment of plants in rural communes

will help to solve part of the repairing problem. At the same time, the setting up of industrial plants in rural communes can help to handle the idling labors that are victims of farm mechanization.

Merely mechanizing the farms is not enough to bring about an increase in national products. The other necessary condition is good management. In order to provide rural communes with better managements, the Chinese State Economic Commission started training sessions on managements on March 3, 1979⁴. The main objective of such sessions is to provide cadres at different administrative levels some backgrounds on modern management through lectures by university professors and high level management personnels. China has realized the importance of modern scientific management techniques since Mao advocated it in 1956:

We must firmly reject and criticize all the decadent bourgeois systems, ideologies and ways of life of foreign countries. But this should in no way prevent us from learning the advanced sciences and technologies of capitalist countries and whatever is scientific in the management of their enterprises. In the industrially developed countries they run their enterprises with fewer people and greater efficiency. All this should be learned well in accordance with our own principles in order to improve our work.⁵

Mao's principle of 'adopting the capitalist's technologies to develop a socialist country' is well echoed by Vice-Premier Deng Xiaoping:

As a matter of fact, the management technologies of the

capitalist countries, especially the development of science and technology, is the common wealth of man kind. There is no reason that such management techniques can not be utilized in a socialist country like China.⁶

However, the major question is : how does the Chinese government transfer such western science and technology to the farmers so that they can increase their agricultural productivity ?

COMMUNICATION NETWORK IN RURAL CHINA

Since 1956, China has outlined a twelve-year media development program for the rural area. This program provides the base for the present communication network in the countryside.

Ever since China started to develop its wired broadcasting network during the First Five Year Plan (1953-57), the system started to grow and now all 29 provinces and autonomous districts have wired broadcasting service. It is reported that 80 per cent of the villages have wired broadcasting service with a total of 8.5 million loudspeakers.

China's wired broadcasting network is structured under a tightly knitted hierarchy. The relay stations in the communes formed the bases with the county broadcasting stations as the center. In this fashion, the hierarchy is composed of four different levels. At the provincial level which is the highest

in a region, a broadcasting unit organized by elected party cadres will lay out the overall policy and provide instructions for county broadcasting stations. At the county level, local stations run by county cadres will carry out the instructions from the provincial broadcasting unit. At the commune level, relay stations are set to relay the programs from county stations. The lowest level in this hierarchy is the production brigades, production teams and individual farming household who dully listen to such broadcasting. The regional network is overarched by the Central People's Broadcasting Station (CPBS) in Peking which provides all the major programs of the entire nation-wide system.

 Fig.1 about here

The nation wide wired broadcasting network accounted for 92.7 per cent of the production teams with 70 per cents of the individual farmers possessing loudspeakers. This is an increase in twelve times over the number of loudspeaker before the Cultural Revolution and virtually every corner in rural China can receive the message from Peking without delay. The accomplishment of such wired broadcasting network is supplemented by the provision of wireless radio broadcasting in medium and short waves. However, not too many farmers can afford to have his own wireless radio set and there is no such need since one can get everything from the wired broadcasting.

One particular characteristic of China's wired broadcasting system is its basic design. Loud speaker takes the place of a

tunable radio receiver at the terminal point and this forced the audience to listen to whatever comes out from the loud speaker. In this way, messages from the central government can reach the farmers and there is no excuse for the farmers not to know any announcement made by the government. In terms of the dissemination of agricultural knowledge, such wired broadcasting program includes the sharing of farm experience and a special feature called "Learning from Tachai" which provides valuable agricultural information to the farmers.

The wired broadcasting in rural China is supplemented by the available of television programs. In 1977, China has 37 television stations with 123 relay stations. By the end of 1978, China increased its television stations to 39 with 125 relay stations. This contingent of stations virtually serves the entire nation. However, television ownership in China is minimal, particularly in the villages. In China, a 12" black and white television set is reported to be costing about US\$120 to US\$240 which is equivalent to half year's salary of an ordinary city worker. Farmers in rural communes usually receive less pay than workers in the city, and this would mean they have to save up one year's salary just for a black and white television.

At the same time, a majority of the 1.5 million television sets in China are locally assembled with parts from Japan. The quality of such television set is low and a painter in Kwangsi once complained that:

I saved up my expenses for two years and spent two hundred dollars for a Peacock brand television set made by the Soochow television factory. It broke down after twelve hours of viewing and I have to wait for eight days before it is returned to me from the repair shop. However, after twenty minutes of viewing, it broke down again and eventually the repair shop has to declare the television set out of service.⁷

As a result of such drawbacks, China has to seek foreign assistance in the manufacturing of television sets, including color television sets. Both Toshiba and Sony of Japan provide tremendous technical help in such aspect, so is RCA of U.S.A. Under such foreign assistance, it is expected that the proliferation of television set will increase so that television can be more effectively used in the diffusion of agricultural technology in the rural areas.

The role television plays in promoting rural development is mainly through its educational program which is structured after the British Open University. In December, 1977, a nationwide educational television was introduced. Such 2-hour program put more emphasis on English language, mathematics, and electronic technology and science. Farmers not qualified for college or university education are encouraged to enroll in such programs so as to acquire the foundation for further education or training. Agricultural knowledge is also introduced through such educational program with instructors from local production brigades and universities. This is the often quoted "combining academic with professionals".

To cope with the scarcity of television sets, China has adopted a mass viewing policy in rural communes. Every production brigades in a commune has a television set in the recreation room for public use. Special cadres are appointed to organise the viewing groups in every commune. Sometimes, viewing of certain programs is mandated and programs selected by higher officials have priority over other programs. It is reported that as ordinary television screen is too small for mass viewing, China has started to develop jumbo projection screens and a county in Honan province has reportedly installed a jumbo television projection screen that can accommodate 500 viewers.⁸

The electronic media are nevertheless complemented by the print media in the rural communication network. Besides the major party newspaper the People's Daily which expresses and explains central government's agricultural policy, communes are also served by community newspapers and regional newspapers. The views of the farmers are expressed in these community newspapers which are sometimes picked up by the provincial officials and reflected to the central government. Of course, opinions of the farmers can also be directly sent to the People's Daily in a more direct way through "Letters to the editor"; however, there is no guarantee for publication of any letters sent.

At the same time, local farmers can also express their views through big character posters. Such posters are a product of the Cultural Revolution (1965) and was adopted by

the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on August 8, 1966:

Through the media of big character posters and great debates, revolutionary young people argue things out expose and criticize thoroughly, and launch resolute attack on open and hidden representatives of the bourgeois.....This is the main current in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.⁹

The Fourth National People's Congress held on January 17, 1975 officially endorsed the big character poster as legitimate means of communication and listed it under the Chinese constitution. Such ratification from the government encouraged the farmers to voice their grievances as well as helping the government to monitor the pace of development in various district. Complaints from farmers are very good references for the central and regional administrations to gauge the execution of party policy pertaining to agricultural development by rural communes.

Besides the afore-mentioned channels, film has also played an important role in the dissemination of agricultural information as well as the socialization of the farmers. Film showing in rural China is through those mobile film projection crews. A typical mobile film projection crew consists of two to three projectionists and is equipped with a generator, a 16mm. film projector, a gramophone and a large screen made from a large piece of cloth.

When showing a film, the projectionist has to follow

such procedures: a pre-showing introduction, explain the content of the film while showing and a post-showing discussion. These were done to ensure that the farmers understand the content of the film and guard them against mis-interpretation. After the Cultural Revolution, the number of mobile film crews decreased drastically and some villages reported to have film shows only once or twice in a month. One explanation may be due to the existence of more television sets in rural communes that the Chinese government decided to cut the service to its minimum except providing service to those remote villages where television sets are unavailable.

Small booklets, pamphlets and brochures concerning agricultural information are also disseminated to the farmers. With the gradual increase in the rural literacy rate over the past ten years, such publications are good references for the farmers. Study groups organized by production brigades and teams also help to reinforce the information and knowledge gained by individuals through various media. Such close interpersonal network, as mentioned earlier, also helps to ratify the accuracy of the information and at the same time provides chances for the exchange of experience among the farmers.

Fig.2 about here

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Admittedly, China has a well planned mass media network that is under the control of the party in its dissemination of information to the farmers. Such top-down communication model works out well in China because of its political environment. In a western democratic country, such absolute top-down model may prove to be dysfunctioning as people enjoy more freedom of speech and expression. On the other hand, China adopts a planned economy and this virtually implies the domination of the government in policy and it is the duty of the local administrations to execute such policy. In this way, there is minimul demand for a two way communication in solciting input from the farmers for policy planning.

However, post-Mao China witnesses a shift in the top-down model. This is particularly true after the purge of the Gang of Four in late 1976 and the launch of the Four Modernizations program in 1977. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a liberal and pragmatist, more upward channels are made available to the farmers. Nevertheless, we must not mis-interpretate the provision of more upward communication channels in China as a sign of more freedom of speech or expression and mass participation in agricultural policy planning.

The denouncing of the big character posters by the party may be a sign that the Chinese government has realised that too many communication channel available to the farmers will

only create chaos as witnessed by the Cultural Revolution and is disastrous to the stable progress of rural development. The status quo of socialism, nevertheless, has also limited the kinds of communication the country can adopt and there is no exception to China.

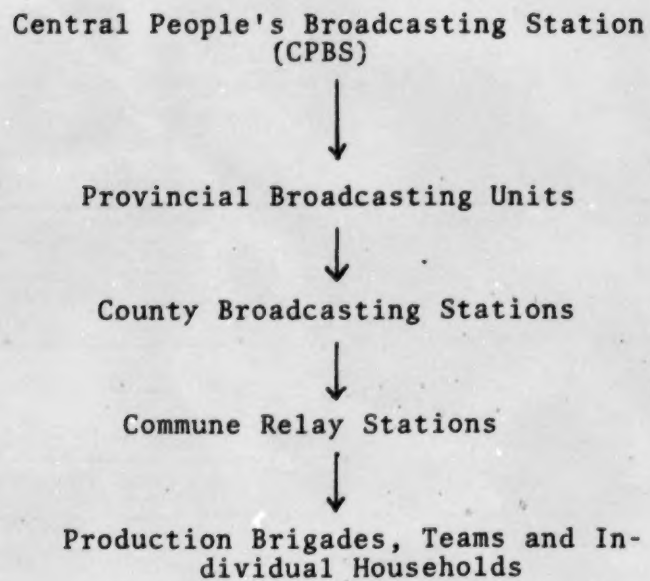


Fig. 1 The Hierarchy of the Chinese Rural Wired Broadcasting Network

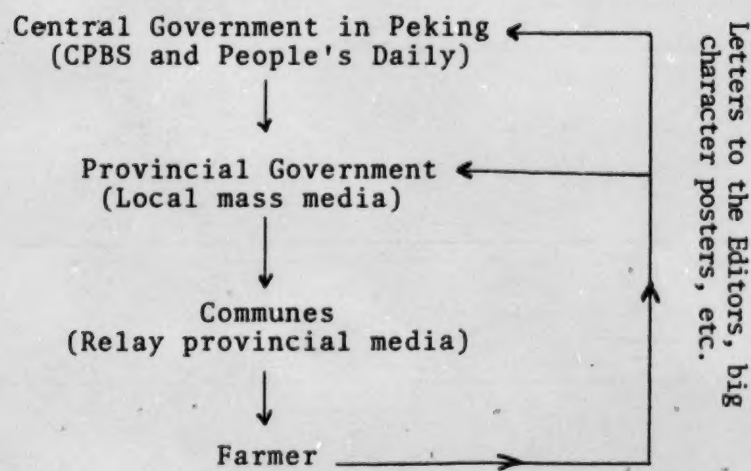


Fig. 2 The Top-down Communication Model of China in Rural Agricultural Development

Notes

- ¹
The Common Program, Article 34, p.14.
- ²
The Proletarian Cultural Revolution Pushes Forward the Properous Development of Science in Our County, p.27.
- ³
People's Daily, March 7, 1978, p.1.
- ⁴
Beijing Review, No.12, March 23, 1979, p.7.
- ⁵
Mao Tsetung, "On the Ten Major Ten Relations" in Selected Works of Mao Tsetung, p.305.
- ⁶
Chinese News Agency, March 21.
- ⁷
Fei Ching Yueh Pao, vol.20, No.10, p.49.
- ⁸
Tai Kong Pao, June 20, 1977, p.3.
- ⁹
People's Daily, August 9, 1966.

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